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"Zero" Scores One*A success at the contras' southern front*

Forty weatherbeaten shacks and a grassy airstrip by a swampy river delta may not seem like much of a military stronghold. But in the year-old guerrilla war along Nicaragua's southern border with Costa Rica, the jungle hamlet of San Juan del Norte has taken on a symbolic importance well beyond its dubious strategic value. After three days of pitched battle two weeks ago, *contra* guerrillas from the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) overwhelmed the Sandinista garrison in the town and scored their first major military victory. After a few uneasy days of quiet, Nicaraguan troops counterattacked last week. As several hundred soldiers advanced, planes and helicopters swooped down and bombed the town. The guerrillas quickly slipped back into the jungle, leaving the smoking remains of San Juan del Norte to be reclaimed by the Sandinistas.

The fall and recapture of San Juan del Norte are not so much military struggle as they are psychological warfare. Before the battle, fighting on Nicaragua's southern front had seemed little more than the personal crusade of Edén Pastora Gómez, 47. The charismatic "Commander Zero" of the Sandinista revolution, Pastora went into exile in 1981 when he became disillusioned with the growing Soviet and Cuban influence in Nicaragua. Within months the fortunes of ARDE had reached such a low point that his financially strapped army moved into Costa Rican refugee camps. Critics joked that the "zero" in his title stood for the number of battles he had fought. After taking San Juan del Norte, the bearded commander could finally add some bite to his bluster. As Pastora told TIME, "San Juan del Norte means more than a beachhead to us. It represents the weapons that will now come to us because we have convinced many democratic governments that ARDE is on the road to victory." The retaking of the town by the Sandinistas did not faze Pastora, since he never believed he could hold on to the territory indefinitely. The initial victory made his point. "You don't think I'm so stupid as to stay there and wait for them [the Sandinista attackers], do you?" Pastora said last week after his retreat.

What Pastora did not say is that ARDE's new-found muscle is largely due to help that he is receiving through CIA channels. The *contra* commander had long refused, publicly at least, to accept American "conditions" for aid. But last November he traveled to Washington and

since then, food and uniforms are no longer in short supply, and ARDE has even built up a small air fleet of three used helicopters and eight light planes. Pastora insists that he made no deals with the "gringos" and that the funds for the equipment come from private donors in Miami, Panama and Colombia. But he wryly adds, "If the CIA goes to them to contribute, what am I going to say?"

Other ARDE officers openly boast of their U.S. connection. Among the benefits they claim: C-140 transport planes airlifting in supplies. The guerrilla leaders also boast that ARDE has received CIA support from the sea. Pastora is evasive on the subject of the offshore fire during the battle for San Juan del Norte. Last week he took personal responsibility for the attack, claiming that mortar canister shells were fired from two fiber-glass speedboats. But he has also offered the contradictory explanation that three CIA boats were involved, a suggestion that at other times he has denied.

Little else goes on in the guerrilla organization without Pastora's knowledge. The ARDE commander dominates his jungle domain, passing on commands to his 4,500 to 5,000 soldiers over a single radio channel. After the raid on San Juan del Norte, he personally oversaw the political indoctrination of captured Sandinista soldiers. He read to the 57 militiamen selected passages from a glowing biography. The title: *Edén Pastora: A Life in Search of Liberty*.

Pastora has won few allies in the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (F.D.N.), the *contra* coalition operating out of Honduras that has received by far the largest share of U.S. aid. Charging that the F.D.N. is made up essentially of former National Guardsmen in camouflage cloth, Pastora says that he still intends to open his own front in the north. He charges that the F.D.N. and the Honduran authorities have arrested at least 27 men he sent north on recruiting missions. Says Pastora: "If we had one-half the help the F.D.N. gets, we would be laying siege to Managua."

Last week, meanwhile, Washington was embroiled in a battle of its own with Managua after it turned down the nomination of Nora Astorga as Nicaraguan ambassador. Astorga, 37, had been involved in the 1978 murder of a National Guard officer believed to have had links to the CIA.

As the war on the southern front enters a new phase, U.S. officials continue to insist that they have no other aim in helping the *contras* than to force the Sandinistas to make a "reasonable accommodation." That is not what Pastora, or the F.D.N., seems to have in mind. Still, with little to unite them and nothing approaching a program to guide them, the *contras* seem destined to oppose the Sandinistas as a foreign-funded guerrilla army rather than a true political threat.

—By John Kohan.

Reported by William McWhirter with Pastora